

# **Simone Weil and *The Poem of Force***

## **From the Fields of Iliion to the Charnel Grounds of Europe**

Vincent Di Stefano  
November 2017



Even as a child, Simone Weil had an understanding of both the deprivations and the depredations of war. At an age when most children can barely see beyond their own shifting desires, Simone Weil had fully grasped the reality and the meaning of sacrifice. She was six years old in 1915 when the immolation of Europe by military force and blind violence had already crossed unspeakable thresholds. In May and June of that year, over one hundred thousand French soldiers lost their lives in the Artois offensive. Three months later, a further one hundred and ninety thousand French soldiers were killed in the three-weeks-long Champagne offensive. In that year alone, nearly two million French soldiers, over a million British soldiers, and over six hundred thousand German soldiers had been killed in an insane mutual slaughter that saw little if any change in the battle lines of the Western Front.

Simone Weil's father, a doctor, had been conscripted for medical service soon after the outbreak of the war. Travelling with her family from base to base, Simone came to know at close range the tragic reverberations of war. At the age of six, she quietly announced at the family table that she would no longer eat sugar but would send her portions to the French soldiers on the Front. This small act was to be the first of many such gestures of identification with the oppressed and the afflicted throughout her life.

The will for solidarity and identification with human suffering in all its forms continued to grow in Simone Weil long after her small gesture in 1915. Diagnosed with tuberculosis while in England in 1943, she steadfastly refused to eat any more food than her French compatriots who had been reduced to survival rations because of the widespread

destruction of agricultural lands, production facilities, and food distribution networks throughout Europe. Despite the efforts of her doctors and even frustrated attempts to tube-feed her, Simone Weil breathed her last on August 24th 1943. She was thirty four years old. E. Jane Doering offers the following account of the circumstances leading to her death:

"She was torn by the thought that she had abandoned her native land in its time of need. Her fragile health and extreme disappointment at not getting permission from the free French Forces to re-enter France led to a physical breakdown with tubercular complications. A cure was rendered impossible by her refusal to eat more than what she believed was available to the most deprived of her compatriots in occupied France, or to accept rich foods - considered the remedy for tuberculosis - while the British were short on rations. The rigor of her thought imposed a harsh consistency on her lifestyle." [1]

## Awakenings



From an early age, Simone Weil had attended closely to the political currents of the time. She identified with revolutionary Marxism even before her adolescence and had become active within workers movements by the time she had reached her twenties. She visited Germany for ten weeks in the summer of 1932 staying mostly in Berlin. While she was there, she came into contact with Leon Trotsky who in 1928 had been expelled from the Soviet Union by Stalin, and with

his inner circle. On her return to France, she published a number of articles on the disarray of German trade unions and on the passivity of the German Communist Party in the face of Hitler's ascendancy.

While visiting Paris the following year, Trotsky and his son stayed briefly in the house of Simone Weil's family. He and Weil vigorously locked horns and, in the words of Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, "engaged in heated discussions of the revolution." [2] Her youthful ideological fixations were rapidly disintegrating as she came to realise the growing violence and oppression exercised by both the communists in Stalin's Soviet Union and the national socialists in Hitler's Germany. Her commitments began to shift from engagement with revolutionary thought to understanding more deeply the lived realities of the poor and the oppressed.

In 1934, she published her reflections as "Oppression and Liberty" (*Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*) - the only book she was ever to write. During the same year, she took leave from her role as teacher in order to take up employment in a number of factories. While working on the assembly line of the Renault plant near Paris, she came face-to-face with the brutality and the violence of factory supervisors, and came to witness directly the impotence and vulnerability of workers ensnared in the industrial system. These experiences quelled even further the revolutionary ardour that had fuelled her earlier years. David Pollard reflects:

"The experience of factory work changed her revolutionary views. Weil moved on from the Marxian notion of workers as the carriers of revolutionary consciousness to a view that factory work killed what was important in the person, leaving little consciousness for personal development or liberation. Weil's factory experience of humiliation, exhaustion and helplessness gave her a powerful metaphor - the slave." [3]

In a letter to a confidant some years later, Simone Weil recalled her factory experiences with both poignancy and eloquence:

"I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue. What I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today when any human being speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake and that unfortunately the mistake will in all probability disappear. There I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron which the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave." [4]

The metaphor of the slave was to become a recurring trope in her writings thereafter.

She left the factories in August 1935 as her already-frail health had broken down under the pressure. She began to experience severe migraines that prevented her from reading and writing for days at a time. Although her physical capacities would never fully recover, Simone Weil's daemonic drivenness remained undiminished, reigniting and burning furiously at every opportunity.

### On War and Rumours of War



The Spanish Civil War broke out on July 17th, 1936. Despite her frailties, she signed up with an anarchist militia together with fellow anarchists from other European countries. Within a month, Weil was in Spain, sporting a carbine on the front-line. In yet another example of the thwarted intention that seemed to be her constant companion, within a few days of arriving, she stumbled into a pot of boiling oil and severely scalded one of her legs. She was forced to return to France soon after because of the injury.

Yet the experience was not an entire debacle. Being thrown into the horrors of actual warfare, she was soon disabused of any notion of the inherent nobility of war.

She came to learn of the fate of a 16 year-old Spanish boy soldier who had been captured by her group. Refusing to join her companions and to renounce his allegiance to Franco, he was summarily executed. This was her first direct encounter with the impersonal brutality that infects all who come under the thrall of force in the fields of war.

On her return to France, she began searching out earlier historic sources in an attempt to understand the nature of the forces that drove individuals and nations to engage in war. Her visit to Germany had made her aware of an increasing militarism that was growing into a machine that threatened to engulf Europe in a holocaust of unrestrained violence. She had even then predicted that Hitler would gain victory in 1933, and that Europe-wide war would inevitably follow.

Long-attuned to the classic Greek spirit, her incisive intelligence turned to Homer's *Iliad* in the hope of deepening her understanding of the realities unfolding around her. She gave voice to her early thoughts in an essay published in 1937, *Let Us Not Begin Again The Trojan War*. She had by that time declared herself a committed pacifist, favouring negotiations with Hitler and endorsing Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. As events inexorably intensified, she came to realise the brutality and the viciousness of Hitler's intention. She was later to reflect on the crucial moment when she finally abandoned her pacifism:

"Ever since the day when I decided, after a very painful inner struggle, that in spite of my pacifist inclinations it had become an over-riding obligation in my eyes to work for Hitler's destruction . . . my resolve has not altered; and that day was the one in which Hitler entered Prague in May 1939, if I remember right. My decision was tardy, perhaps . . . and I bitterly reproach myself for it." [5]

### *L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force*

Weil and her family succeeded in escaping Paris in the days immediately before Hitler's troops occupied the city. They relocated to Vichy and then Marseilles in the south of France. It was here that she once again turned to Homer's *Iliad*, but this time in the full light of Germany's crushing assaults on its European neighbours. Within a short time, she had produced an astonishingly original interpretation of the poem unlike any that had ever preceded it. Her *L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force*, was translated into English in 1945 as *The Poem of Force*. It was no fine and detailed literary analysis of the poem. For Simone Weil, the *Iliad* was not about the Gods, the strategies, the treaties, the entreaties, and the negotiations of warring parties. The *Iliad* was, in its essence, a poetic study of the subjection of men to the determinations of force, and an account of the consequence of its exercise both on those who would wield it and those who are crushed by it. The essay was first published in 1940 in *Les Cahiers du Sud*, a literary journal based in Marseilles. It begins with the following extraordinary paragraph:

"The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations to force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very centre of history, the *Iliad* is the purest and loveliest of mirrors." [6]

Nowhere in the essay was there any explicit mention of the situation that confronted Europe at the time. Like the poem itself, Weil drew from the timeless elements fashioned by Homer to provide an account of the slow descent of the human spirit into a destructive and dehumanising mania under the thrall of force.

Weil's essay is beyond paraphrasing or summarising. Its density and its balance need to be directly experienced. In a dual study of Weil's *Poem of Force* and a parallel essay, *On the Iliad* written by her contemporary and compatriot Rachel Bepaloff, Cicero Bruce articulates the impossibility of adequately re-presenting either of these works satisfactorily. He writes:

"One can fully appreciate the essays revisited here only by experiencing them for himself. For they are neither reducible to any terms short of those which translate the originals into English nor satisfactorily expressible in any summary or paraphrase. What impels their description here is the hope that they will find readers in our day." [7]

I can do no better than to re-echo Bruce's sentiments - particularly in regard to Simone Weil's *L'Illade, ou le poème de la force*.

The final pages of Weil's essay provide privileged entry into her deeper quest to reconcile the Greek genius with her own unique Christian revelation. Her highly developed scholarly and experiential perspectives were precipitously challenged soon after she returned from Spain as a result of three intensely mystical experiences. These culminated when, in her own words, "Christ himself came down and took possession of me." [8]

These unanticipated experiences did not alter the intensity, but redirected the style of her philosophic quest as she more determinedly sought out the perennial sources of insight into the numinous, transcendental and supernatural dimensions of human experience. These sources included the Gospels, the Bhagavad Gita, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Koran, and Taoist and Buddhist literatures. Although Simone Weil continued to engage deeply with Catholicism in her latter years, she maintained complete independence from all institutional forms and, according to all accounts, chose not to formalise her relationship with the Church through the sacrament of baptism.

### ***The Poem of Force as Performance***

For those with the staying power, Romanian dramatist and Professor of Theatre, Simona Giurgea brings her full European presence and sensitivity to a stark and at times electrifying performance of Weil's *The Poem of Force* in a video recorded in 2015. Trained in Romania, and serving as lecturer at a number of universities in the U.S. since 1995, Simona Giurgea offers a masterful on-stage re-creation of Weil's essay. In it, she resuscitates the nearly-lost art of the *rhapsodei*, the ancient Greek poets and interpreters of Homer who carried his work in their very being having committed the epic poem to memory and reviving it with each new performance.

In her dramatic interpretation, Simona Giurgea seamlessly interweaves Weil's text and selected excerpts from the *Iliad* into a performance that both elicits and reflects the timeless nature of Homer's poem. The video of Simona Giurgea's performance can be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMlweTL9000>

### **SOURCES**

1. E. Jane Doering, (2010): *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, p. 7

2. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, (2001): *Three Women in Dark Times. Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, p. 59
3. David Pollard, (2015): *The Continuing Legacy of Simone Weil*, Hamilton Books, Maryland, p. 15
4. Simone Weil, Letter IV, *Spiritual Autobiography*. [In: Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, Fontana Books (Collins), U.K., 1959, p. 33]
5. Quoted by Christopher Benfey, *A Tale of Two Iliads* (pp. 207-219) in Christopher E. G. Benfey and Karen Remmner, eds. (2006): *Artists, Intellectuals and World War II*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amhurst, p. 216
6. Simone Weil, "The Iliad or, The Poem of Force", *Politics*, 1945, vol. 2, no. 11, (pp. 321-331) [Translated by Mary McCarthy], p. 321
7. Cicero Bruce, "Reading the *Iliad* in the Light of Eternity", *Modern Age*, 2006, vol. 48, no. 1, (pp. 48-58), p. 55
8. Letter IV, *Spiritual Autobiography*, p. 35

**Vincent Di Stefano M.H.Sc., D.O., N.D**  
**Inverloch, November 2017**